Strategic Omission: The USS Liberty, Mearsheimer and Walt, and the Boundaries of the Israel Lobby Thesis

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In 2007, John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt published The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy, a work that fundamentally altered the discourse surrounding American Middle East strategy. By applying the rigors of structural realism and interest-group theory to the U.S.-Israel relationship, the authors argued that a loose coalition of individuals and organizations consistently nudges U.S. policy in directions that deviate from the national interest. However, a glaring silence haunts the text: the 1967 attack on the USS Liberty. This omission has sparked intense debate among historians and intelligence veterans like Ray McGovern, who argue that the incident serves as the ultimate proof of the Lobby's power to enforce immunity even in the face of lethal force against American service members. This paper examines the systemic reasons for this exclusion, analyzing whether it was a methodological necessity, a strategic retreat to maintain academic legitimacy, or a failure to account for the deeper, non-electoral dimensions of the special relationship. By exploring the tension between "normal" interest-group politics and the raw realities of military-intelligence history, we assess how the absence of the Liberty affects the credibility and scope of the Mearsheimer-Walt thesis.

Keywords: USS Liberty, Mearsheimer, Walt, Israel Lobby, U.S. Foreign Policy, Realism, Six-Day War, Ray McGovern, Interest Group Theory, Middle East Policy, Academic Taboo, Special Relationship.

Based in part on: Ray McGovern - Netanyahu Changes His Objective Because He's Losing

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2_qTun3VYOI

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1. The Genesis of the Israel Lobby Thesis

1.1. From London Review of Books to Global Debate

The intellectual journey of the Israel Lobby thesis began not as a full-length book, but as a commissioned working paper that the American academic and journalistic establishment initially found too radioactive to handle. John J. Mearsheimer of the University of Chicago and Stephen M. Walt of the Harvard Kennedy School originally produced the manuscript for The Atlantic Monthly. However, the magazine ultimately declined to publish the piece, a move that the authors and their supporters interpreted as an early validation of their central claim: that certain topics regarding U.S.-Israel relations were effectively off-limits in mainstream American discourse. The paper eventually found a home across the Atlantic, appearing in the London Review of Books in March 2006. The reaction was instantaneous and explosive, crashing the publication's website and triggering a global firestorm that spanned op-ed pages from New York to Jerusalem.

The transition from a scholarly working paper to a New York Times bestseller in 2007 represented a watershed moment in American political science. For decades, the influence of interest groups on foreign policy had been studied in the context of the Cuban-American lobby or the various iterations of the military-industrial complex, but the Israel Lobby had remained a sensitive subject, often avoided by tenure-track academics fearing professional reprisal. Mearsheimer and Walt, both titans in the field of International Relations, possessed the professional stature to weather the inevitable accusations of bias. They argued that the post-9/11 trajectory of American Middle East policy, particularly the rush to war in Iraq, could not be fully understood without accounting for the pressure exerted by a loose coalition of individuals and organizations working to steer U.S. foreign policy in a pro-Israel direction. This debate was not merely academic; it occurred against a backdrop of mounting American casualties in the Middle East and a growing sense among the public that the strategic justifications for such interventions were increasingly disconnected from reality.

1.2. Defining the Realist Perspective in Foreign Policy

To understand why the omission of the USS Liberty is so glaring to critics like Ray McGovern, one must first understand the specific theoretical lens Mearsheimer and Walt employed. Both authors are prominent proponents of Realism, a school of thought in international relations that views the global arena as an anarchic system where sovereign states act primarily to ensure their own survival and security. In this worldview, states are rational actors that calculate their foreign policy based on the national interest, which is typically defined in terms of physical security, economic prosperity, and strategic autonomy. According to pure Realist theory, a Great Power like the United States should never allow its foreign policy to be dictated by the parochial

interests of a smaller client state, especially when those interests conflict with the Great Power's own strategic objectives.

The authors utilized a specific branch of this theory to argue that the U.S.-Israel relationship had become an anomaly in international politics. They contended that while Israel may have been a strategic asset during the Cold War by serving as a bulwark against Soviet expansion in the Middle East, that utility vanished with the collapse of the Soviet Union. From a Realist standpoint, the continued and unconditional support for Israel—despite the friction it caused with oil-producing Arab states and the rise of anti-American sentiment in the Muslim world—represented a failure of the American state to act rationally. They concluded that this irrationality was the result of domestic political capture. By framing the Lobby as a normal interest group that had successfully hijacked the policy-making process, Mearsheimer and Walt sought to provide a structural explanation for why the U.S. government consistently made choices that, in their view, undermined American national security. It is precisely this focus on the rational national interest that makes their silence on the USS Liberty so paradoxical, as a direct military attack on a state's own vessel is perhaps the most fundamental violation of national interest imaginable.

2. The USS Liberty: A History of Contention

2.1. The Events of June 8, 1967

On the fourth day of the Six-Day War, the USS Liberty, a technical research ship—essentially a sophisticated eavesdropping platform operated by the National Security Agency in conjunction with the Navy—was cruising in international waters off the coast of the Sinai Peninsula. The vessel was lightly armed with only four .50-caliber machine guns, intended for basic defense rather than combat. Despite its non-combatant status and the clear markings of a U.S. Navy ship, including a freshly hoisted American flag, it was subjected to a coordinated and prolonged assault by the Israeli Air Force and Motor Torpedo Boats. The attack began in the early afternoon with unmarked Mirage III fighter jets strafing the deck with 30mm cannons and rockets, specifically targeting the ship’s communication antennae to prevent the crew from broadcasting a distress signal.

Following the initial air raids, the assault escalated with the arrival of Mystère IV jets, which dropped napalm canisters onto the ship’s bridge and deck, turning the vessel into a floating inferno. As the crew struggled to tend to the wounded and extinguish the fires, Israeli motor torpedo boats closed in. They launched at least five torpedoes, one of which struck the starboard side, tearing a massive hole into the hull and instantly killing twenty-six technicians in the lower compartments. Even as the crew prepared to abandon ship, survivors reported that

the torpedo boats circled the vessel, machine-gunning the life rafts that had been lowered into the water. By the time the assault ended, thirty-four American servicemen were dead and one hundred and seventy-four were wounded. The Liberty remained afloat, but it was a charred, twisted wreck of steel, and the incident remains the deadliest attack on a U.S. Navy ship in history that did not result in a formal declaration of war.

2.2. Official Findings vs. Survivor Testimony

The immediate aftermath of the attack saw the emergence of two irreconcilable narratives. The Israeli government issued an official apology, claiming the attack was a tragic case of mistaken identity. They asserted that their forces had misidentified the Liberty as the El Quseir, an out-of-service Egyptian horse transport ship that was significantly smaller and possessed a completely different profile. The official Israeli position was that in the fog of war, and under the pressure of the ongoing conflict, the pilots and naval commanders failed to recognize the American flag or the ship's hull markings. This version of events was eventually adopted by the U.S. Naval Board of Inquiry, which concluded its investigation in a remarkably short period, though its findings focused primarily on the crew's bravery rather than the culpability of the attackers.

However, the survivors of the USS Liberty, led by officers like Commander William McGonagle—who would later receive the Medal of Honor for his conduct during the attack—have consistently and vehemently challenged this official version. Survivor testimony points to several factors that suggest the attack was deliberate. First, they describe hours of close-proximity reconnaissance by Israeli aircraft prior to the attack, during which the pilots would have been able to see the American flag clearly. Second, the technical precision of the jamming of the Liberty's radio frequencies suggests that the attackers knew exactly which ship they were targeting. Third, the duration and intensity of the attack, involving multiple waves of air and sea units, seemed inconsistent with a simple mistake. Critics like Ray McGovern have long argued that the survivors were effectively gagged by the U.S. government, threatened with court-martial if they spoke about the events, a move interpreted as a prioritization of geopolitical alliances over the lives of American sailors.

2.3. The Political Fallout in the Johnson Administration

The political reaction within the Johnson administration was characterized by a frantic effort to manage a potential diplomatic disaster. Internally, high-ranking officials were deeply skeptical of the Israeli explanation. Secretary of State Dean Rusk and CIA Director Richard Helms both expressed private doubts that the attack was an accident, with Rusk later writing in his memoirs that he never believed the Israeli story. Despite these internal suspicions, the overarching concern of the White House was the broader Cold War context. The Six-Day War was a flashpoint of East-West tension, and President Lyndon B. Johnson was wary of any incident that

could lead to a direct confrontation with the Soviet Union or undermine the newly strengthened bond with Israel.

As a result, the administration moved quickly to contain the news and minimize the friction. Reports suggest that U.S. carrier-based aircraft, which had been launched to defend the Liberty after a distress signal finally got through, were recalled on direct orders from Washington—some accounts even point to Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara or President Johnson himself—reportedly because they did not want to embarrass an ally. The diplomatic resolution involved Israel paying reparations to the families of the victims and the injured, but no formal admission of intentionality was ever extracted. For many observers, this set a historical precedent: it demonstrated that the strategic and political value of the relationship with Israel was so high that it could survive even the most egregious military provocations. This "culture of silence" created a blueprint for how future controversies in the relationship would be handled, making the Liberty a foundational moment for those who believe the U.S.-Israel bond operates outside the norms of standard international diplomacy.

3. Methodological Constraints and Chronological Scope

3.1. The Post-Cold War Focus of Mearsheimer and Walt

The most immediate and practical explanation for the omission of the USS Liberty lies in the specific temporal boundaries established by the authors. Mearsheimer and Walt did not set out to write an exhaustive history of U.S.-Israel relations from 1948 to the present. Instead, their work was a targeted intervention into the foreign policy debates of the early 21st century. The central puzzle they sought to solve was why the United States, as the world's sole superpower following the collapse of the Soviet Union, continued to provide unconditional support for Israel even when that support appeared to clash with broader American strategic interests in the Middle East, such as the stabilization of Iraq and the containment of regional extremism.

By narrowing their focus primarily to the post-Cold War era, and more specifically to the period between the 1991 Gulf War and the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the authors constructed a dataset that was relevant to contemporary policymakers and voters. Their analysis leaned heavily on the neoconservative influence within the George W. Bush administration and the specific lobbying efforts that preceded the Iraq War. In this context, an event from 1967 might have seemed like an unnecessary diversion into the deep past. For a social scientist aiming to prove a current trend, the most recent data points are often considered the most salient. The authors likely viewed the Liberty as a relic of a different era of international relations, one characterized by different strategic imperatives and a different cast of political actors.

3.2. Why 1967 Falls Outside the Primary Dataset

Methodologically, political science often distinguishes between historical case studies and contemporary policy analysis. The USS Liberty incident occurred nearly four decades before the publication of the London Review of Books article. Including it would have required Mearsheimer and Walt to engage with a vastly different archival record and a different set of geopolitical variables. In 1967, the lobby as we know it today—characterized by the institutional dominance of organizations like AIPAC and the proliferation of pro-Israel think tanks—was still in its formative stages. While influence certainly existed during the Johnson administration, it had not yet achieved the systemic, multi-layered presence in the halls of Congress and the executive branch that the authors aimed to describe in the 2000s.

Furthermore, the 1967 war was a period of high-stakes Cold War maneuvering. The dynamics of the relationship were dictated by the fear of Soviet penetration into Egypt and Syria. From a research design perspective, including the Liberty would have introduced significant "noise" into their argument. It would have forced the authors to litigate the specifics of a military engagement that remains classified in many respects, moving the focus away from their primary evidence: public campaign contributions, voting records, and the published outputs of Washington-based policy institutes. By excluding 1967, they maintained a cleaner, more contemporary dataset that allowed them to focus on the "New Middle East" and the post-9/11 security environment.

3.3. The Shift from Strategic Asset to Strategic Liability

A cornerstone of the Mearsheimer-Walt thesis is the argument that the strategic value of Israel to the United States has undergone a fundamental transformation. They argue that during the Cold War, Israel served as a valuable proxy that could check the influence of Soviet-aligned Arab states and provide the U.S. with a reliable democratic foothold in a volatile region. Under this "strategic asset" framework, many Realists are willing to overlook friction points, viewing them as the unavoidable costs of a necessary alliance. If the authors had included the Liberty, they would have had to explain why a "strategic asset" would attack its primary benefactor, a complication that might have muddied their clean distinction between the Cold War and post-Cold War eras.

Their primary contention is that after 1991, Israel transitioned from a strategic asset to a strategic liability. They argue that in the absence of a Soviet threat, the primary challenges to American interests were regional instability and the rise of non-state actors, both of which they believe were exacerbated by the "special relationship." By focusing on the period where Israel's utility was supposedly at its lowest, they could more effectively argue that only domestic political pressure—the Lobby—could explain the persistence of such high levels of support.

Including the Liberty, which occurred when the "asset" argument was at its strongest, might have inadvertently suggested that the relationship has always been fraught with such tensions, regardless of the strategic landscape, thereby undermining their specific "liability" narrative.

4. The Lobby as a Normal Interest Group

4.1. Comparison with the NRA and American Farm Bureau

A central pillar of the Mearsheimer-Walt thesis is the normalization of the Israel Lobby within the context of American domestic politics. Rather than portraying the lobby as a shadowy or exceptional entity, the authors explicitly categorize it alongside other powerful American interest groups, such as the National Rifle Association (NRA), the American Farm Bureau, and the AARP. By doing so, they frame the lobby's activities—ranging from campaign contributions and legislative pressure to the cultivation of media narratives—as standard exercises of democratic participation. This comparison serves to demystify the lobby's influence, suggesting that its success is not the result of clandestine maneuvers but rather the product of superior organization, financial resources, and a deep understanding of the American political machinery.

In this framework, the authors argue that the lobby's ability to move U.S. policy in a pro-Israel direction is a testament to the effectiveness of the pluralist system, where well-organized minorities often prevail over a disorganized or indifferent majority. They posit that the lobby does not need to resort to illegal or extra-constitutional means to achieve its goals; it simply utilizes the existing legal structures of the U.S. political system more effectively than its rivals. This "normal interest group" model allows the authors to analyze the lobby without necessarily questioning the legality of its methods, focusing instead on the strategic outcome of its influence and how that outcome diverges from what a purely realist calculation of the national interest would dictate.

4.2. Avoiding the Conspiracy Theory Label

The decision to frame the lobby as a "normal" interest group was also a strategic defensive maneuver. Mearsheimer and Walt were acutely aware that any critique of the U.S.-Israel relationship is frequently met with accusations of promoting antisemitic tropes or conspiracy theories regarding Jewish control of government. To insulate their work from such attacks, they took great pains to emphasize that the lobby is a coalition of both Jews and non-Jews—including a significant number of Christian Zionists—and that its power is rooted in political mobilization rather than ethnic or religious identity. They repeatedly state that the lobby's activities are as "American as apple pie," emphasizing that they are not alleging a "cabal" or a "secret society."

It is in this specific context that the omission of the USS Liberty becomes most understandable from a strategic standpoint. The Liberty incident has long been a focal point for those who believe the U.S.-Israel relationship is characterized by a "deep state" betrayal or a deliberate cover-up of Israeli aggression. By including a detailed analysis of a 1967 military attack and its subsequent political suppression, Mearsheimer and Walt would have risked aligning their work with a more radical, less academically mainstream discourse. To maintain their standing as serious realist scholars, they likely felt it necessary to distance their thesis from any historical event that is commonly associated with "fringe" or "conspiratorial" interpretations of the relationship, even if that event offered potent evidence for their broader claims.

4.3. The Limits of Pluralism in Foreign Policy Analysis

The authors' reliance on the interest-group model, while effective for academic positioning, highlights a significant tension in their analysis: the limits of pluralism when applied to national security. In domestic politics, the competition between interest groups—such as labor unions versus corporate lobbyists—is seen as the engine of a healthy democracy. However, in the realm of foreign policy, the stakes are existential. Realist theory suggests that the "national interest" should be a unified, objective reality that transcends the bickering of domestic factions. When an interest group successfully pushes a Great Power to adopt a policy that arguably endangers its own troops or its long-term strategic position, it suggests a breakdown of the state's rational decision-making apparatus.

Critics of the Mearsheimer-Walt omission argue that by adhering strictly to the "normal interest group" framework, the authors failed to account for how the lobby's influence can reach into the most sensitive areas of military and intelligence policy. The USS Liberty is the quintessential example of an incident where the normal rules of interest-group politics—lobbying for aid or favorable trade deals—were bypassed in favor of high-level executive silence and the suppression of military justice. By treating the lobby as a "normal" group, the authors may have inadvertently minimized its most profound impact: the ability to redefine the national interest itself, to the point where even a lethal attack on the American flag could be absorbed and neutralized by the political system.

5. The Ray McGovern Critique: Influence vs. Immunity

5.1. The Litmus Test of National Sovereignty

Ray McGovern, a former CIA analyst with decades of experience in the intelligence community, has been one of the most vocal critics of the decision to omit the USS Liberty from the Israel Lobby thesis. For McGovern and like-minded observers, the 1967 attack is not a historical anomaly but a litmus test for the actual sovereignty of the United States government.

McGovern argues that Mearsheimer and Walt's focus on influence—the ability to sway votes, secure aid, or shape public opinion—only scratches the surface of the power dynamic. While influence is a common feature of many interest groups, McGovern posits that the handling of the Liberty incident demonstrates a much more profound and dangerous phenomenon: immunity.

In the context of international relations, sovereignty is defined by a state's ability to protect its citizens and its military assets from foreign aggression. When a foreign power attacks a naval vessel, the standard sovereign response is a demand for a full, transparent investigation, the holding of responsible parties to account, and, in many cases, retaliatory measures. By failing to pursue these avenues, the United States effectively signaled that its relationship with Israel took precedence over its own sovereign duty to its sailors. For McGovern, the Liberty incident proves that the Lobby's power had already reached a stage in 1967 where it could force the American executive branch to abdicate its most basic national security responsibilities.

5.2. Analyzing the Silence of the Executive Branch

The critique of the Mearsheimer-Walt omission deeply involves the behavior of the Executive Branch during and after the attack. McGovern and other intelligence veterans point to the "top-down" nature of the silence surrounding the Liberty. Reports from survivors and high-ranking naval officers suggest that the initial distress calls from the ship were met with a baffling sequence of orders from the White House and the Pentagon. The recall of rescue aircraft from the USS America and the USS Saratoga while the Liberty was still under fire remains one of the most controversial aspects of the incident. This level of interference suggests that the political considerations of the "special relationship" had penetrated the military chain of command at the highest possible level.

The subsequent "gag order" placed on the survivors—threatening them with imprisonment if they discussed the attack with the media or even their families—is viewed by critics as evidence of a systemic cover-up that goes far beyond "normal" interest-group lobbying. While Mearsheimer and Walt focus on how the Lobby influences Congress to pass favorable legislation, McGovern focuses on how the Lobby (or the fear of its political repercussions) can paralyze the Presidency and the Department of Defense. This silence of the Executive Branch is, in McGovern's view, the ultimate manifestation of the Lobby's power, as it demonstrates that even the Commander-in-Chief is unwilling to challenge the narrative when it involves Israeli interests.

5.3. The Liberty as the Ultimate Proof of Lobby Power

The crux of the McGovern critique is that by leaving out the Liberty, Mearsheimer and Walt missed the "extreme case" that validates their entire theory. In scientific and social scientific

research, the extreme case often reveals truths that are obscured in more common, moderate examples. If a lobby can successfully manage the political fallout of thirty-four dead American sailors and a destroyed Navy ship, it stands to reason that it can easily manage smaller controversies, such as housing starts in the West Bank or the nuances of a trade agreement. The Liberty represents the outer boundary of what a domestic interest group can achieve in terms of policy distortion.

By omitting this history, the authors may have inadvertently weakened their own argument by making the Lobby seem less powerful than it actually is. McGovern suggests that the authors were perhaps too concerned with maintaining their academic respectability, leading them to ignore the "unpleasant" history of military betrayal that the Liberty represents. For those who view the U.S.-Israel relationship through the lens of the Liberty, the omission feels like an attempt to describe a storm while ignoring the most devastating hurricane in the record books. Integrating the Liberty into the thesis would have shifted the discussion from campaign donations to the fundamental integrity of the American chain of command, a shift that McGovern believes is necessary to fully grasp the stakes of the Israel Lobby's influence.

6. Navigating the Third Rail: Academic Risks and Political Pressure

6.1. The Climate of the Mid-2000s Intellectual Discourse

The period following the September 11 attacks and the subsequent invasion of Iraq created a uniquely constrained environment for American public intellectuals. The national discourse was heavily influenced by a "with us or against us" mentality, and critiques of U.S. alliances in the Middle East were often framed as unpatriotic or strategically naive. Within this context, the U.S.-Israel relationship was frequently treated as the "third rail" of American politics—an issue so electrically charged that touching it could result in professional or social career termination. Mearsheimer and Walt were operating in an era where the neoconservative movement held significant sway over both the executive branch and the major media outlets, making any structural critique of the Israel Lobby a high-stakes gamble. For academics at Harvard and the University of Chicago, the pressure to maintain a specific standard of "acceptable" discourse was immense, as their institutional affiliations made them high-profile targets for well-funded advocacy groups.

6.2. Anticipating Charges of Antisemitism and Dual Loyalty

The authors were fully aware that their work would be met with the most severe rhetorical weapons available in the American political lexicon. The primary defense used by supporters of the status quo was to conflate criticism of the Israeli government or its American lobbyists with antisemitism. Specifically, critics were often accused of invoking the "Protocols of the Elders of

Zion" or suggesting that American Jews held dual loyalty to a foreign power. Mearsheimer and Walt meticulously designed their prose to avoid these pitfalls, emphasizing that the Lobby was a collection of interest groups rather than a religious or ethnic conspiracy. However, the USS Liberty incident carries historical baggage that makes these defenses harder to maintain in a hostile media environment. Because the Liberty incident involves themes of military betrayal and the suppression of American interests, the authors likely feared that including it would provide their detractors with the perfect ammunition to claim the book was a modern iteration of classic tropes, regardless of the factual accuracy of the incident itself.

6.3. The Strategy of Moderate Framing for Maximum Impact

To ensure their message reached beyond a fringe audience, Mearsheimer and Walt adopted a strategy of extreme moderation in their evidentiary choices. They sought to produce a work that could be debated at the Council on Foreign Relations, reviewed in the New York Times, and taught in elite university classrooms. This necessitated a form of analytical triage, where the most controversial or "messy" historical incidents were sacrificed to preserve the integrity of the broader thesis. By sticking to verifiable, public-record data such as campaign finance records, legislative successes, and the published writings of Washington-based pundits, they built a case that was difficult to dismiss as a conspiracy theory. Omitting the USS Liberty was, in this sense, a tactical retreat. While the incident may have been a powerful data point for the "immunity" argument championed by Ray McGovern, the authors likely calculated that its inclusion would have made the book too easy to marginalize, preventing it from achieving the massive cultural and political impact that it ultimately had on the foreign policy establishment.

7. Intelligence, Diplomacy, and the Deep State Gap

7.1. Interest Groups vs. Institutional Cover-ups

The fundamental distinction between the Mearsheimer-Walt thesis and the grievances of USS Liberty advocates lies in the difference between public political influence and private institutional protection. Mearsheimer and Walt built their argument on the visible mechanisms of American democracy: the drafting of legislation, the funding of political campaigns, and the dissemination of policy papers through well-established think tanks. This is the realm of interest group politics, where power is measured by the ability to move a vote on the House floor or secure a billion-dollar aid package in the federal budget. Their model suggests that the Lobby operates within the system, albeit with disproportionate efficacy, to ensure that the legislative and executive branches view Israeli interests as synonymous with American ones.

In contrast, the USS Liberty incident belongs to the darker, more opaque world of institutional cover-ups and executive-level secrecy. While lobbying is about steering future policy, a cover-up

is about managing the aftermath of a catastrophic failure or a direct provocation. Critics of the omission argue that by focusing only on the Lobby's role in shaping policy, the authors ignored the more sinister side of the relationship: the ability of an ally to bypass the democratic process entirely through "deep state" channels. This involves the active suppression of evidence by the Navy, the CIA, and the White House to prevent a public outcry that would necessitate a change in strategic direction. For scholars like Mearsheimer and Walt, such mechanisms are difficult to quantify and even harder to prove using standard political science methodologies, leading them to prefer the cleaner, more transparent data provided by lobbying records.

7.2. The Role of the CIA and NSA in the Liberty Legacy

The USS Liberty was not merely a Navy ship; it was a sophisticated signals intelligence platform carrying a large contingent of NSA linguists and technicians. The intelligence community's perspective on the attack has historically been much more cynical than the official diplomatic stance. Internal NSA documents and the personal writings of former CIA directors like Richard Helms suggest a deep-seated belief that the attack was intentional and that the subsequent investigation was a whitewash. This creates a fascinating gap in the American power structure: while the political class and the lobbying apparatus maintained a pro-Israel consensus, the intelligence and military professionals who suffered the loss of their colleagues felt a profound sense of institutional betrayal.

This rift suggests that the Israel Lobby's influence is not monolithic. It may be highly effective at controlling the public-facing political narrative while facing quiet but intense resentment within the permanent national security bureaucracy. By omitting the Liberty, Mearsheimer and Walt missed an opportunity to explore how the Lobby manages this internal friction. The incident illustrates how the "special relationship" can survive even when the intelligence community—the very people charged with defining the national interest—is convinced that an ally has committed a hostile act. This suggests that the Lobby's power is not just about persuading leaders but about creating a political environment where intelligence and military leaders feel they cannot speak the truth without risking their careers.

7.3. Why Political Scientists Avoid Classified History

The reluctance of mainstream political scientists to engage with the USS Liberty also stems from the professional standards of the discipline. Academia prioritizes "falsifiable" hypotheses and data that can be replicated or verified through public archives. The history of the USS Liberty, however, is heavily bogged down in classified files, redacted memos, and conflicting oral histories that are difficult to process through the rigors of quantitative or even qualitative political science. To many academics, intelligence history feels more like investigative journalism or "revisionist" history than serious social science. There is a fear that by wading into the "grey

world" of signals intelligence and secret orders, one loses the objective footing required for a reputable scholarly work.

Furthermore, Mearsheimer and Walt are proponents of structural realism, a theory that focuses on large-scale power dynamics between states rather than the minutiae of individual incidents or intelligence failures. From their perspective, the "structure" of the international system and the "structure" of domestic lobbying are the primary drivers of behavior. A single military attack, no matter how egregious, is often dismissed as a "data outlier" or a "black swan" event that does not change the broader trend. By avoiding the classified and contentious history of the Liberty, the authors remained within the safe harbor of public record and high-level theory, ensuring their work would be judged on its ideological and systemic merits rather than its ability to solve a decades-old military mystery.

8. Comparative Omissions: The Liberty vs. Pollard and Lavon

8.1. Assessing Other High-Friction Incidents in the Relationship

The USS Liberty is not the only instance of acute tension in the history of the U.S.-Israel alliance, but the way Mearsheimer and Walt treat other scandals reveals much about their underlying methodology. To understand their selective history, one must look at how they handled the Jonathan Pollard spy case and the earlier Lavon Affair. Jonathan Pollard, a U.S. Navy intelligence analyst who provided thousands of highly classified documents to Israel in the mid-1980s, remains the most damaging case of espionage committed by an ally against the United States. In their book, the authors do address the Pollard case, but they frame it primarily as an example of how the Lobby works to mitigate the fallout of such scandals. They focus on the persistent efforts of pro-Israel organizations to secure a presidential pardon for Pollard, highlighting this as evidence of how domestic pressure can force the executive branch to reconsider even the most egregious breaches of national security.

In contrast, the Lavon Affair of 1954—a failed Israeli covert operation in Egypt involving false flag bombings intended to frame Egyptian groups and sour U.S.-Egyptian relations—is largely absent from their primary analysis. Like the Liberty, the Lavon Affair involved a direct attempt to manipulate American foreign policy through clandestine and deceptive means. However, because it occurred during the Eisenhower administration, it predates the era of the modern, high-functioning Lobby that is the central subject of the book. By including Pollard but excluding the Liberty and the Lavon Affair, the authors demonstrate a clear preference for incidents that resulted in public, legal, and political lobbying efforts over those that were characterized by military violence or immediate, secret intelligence maneuvers. This choice allows them to stay

within the bounds of domestic political science rather than venturing into the more controversial territory of military history and intelligence failures.

8.2. Selective Evidence and the Maintenance of a Thesis

The inclusion or exclusion of specific historical data points is a fundamental part of constructing any political science thesis, and for Mearsheimer and Walt, this process was governed by the need for analytical consistency. The authors prioritize evidence that supports their interest group model, which relies on observable, legal, and public-facing activities. The Pollard case fits this model perfectly because it eventually moved from a secret intelligence failure into the public sphere of lobbying, clemency campaigns, and high-level congressional pressure. It became a political issue that could be measured in terms of lobbyist visits and public statements. The Liberty, conversely, never transitioned into a normal political debate; it remained trapped in the realm of military grievance and classified disputes, never becoming a centerpiece of active lobbying efforts.

This selective evidence gathering serves to maintain the structural integrity of their Realist argument. If the authors had included every instance of Israeli intelligence or military overreach—ranging from the technical thefts of the NUMEC nuclear material to the 1967 attack—the book might have read less like a critique of foreign policy and more like a catalog of betrayal. Such a shift would have fundamentally altered the book's reception, potentially moving it from the social science section of bookstores to the conspiracy or polemic shelves. By omitting the Liberty, Mearsheimer and Walt effectively streamlined their argument to focus on the rational policy failures of the modern era. This shielded them from the accusation that they were litigating the entire history of the relationship based on its most extreme and violent outliers, even if critics like Ray McGovern argue that those outliers are precisely what prove the Lobby's true power to enforce immunity for the ally.

9. The Impact of Omission on Public Perception

9.1. Criticism from the Non-Interventionist Right and Left

The decision to exclude the USS Liberty did not go unnoticed by the very audiences most likely to support the book's overarching critique of U.S. foreign policy. For the non-interventionist "Old Right," represented by paleoconservatives and libertarians, and the anti-war Left, the omission felt like a strategic pulling of punches. These groups often view the U.S.-Israel relationship not merely as an imbalanced alliance but as a compromise of national sovereignty. To these critics, the Liberty is the definitive proof of a "captured" state. By ignoring it, Mearsheimer and Walt inadvertently alienated a segment of their potential readership that looks for a more radical, historical accounting of the relationship's costs. These readers argued

that if the authors were truly "Realists," they should have been willing to look at the most realistic—and brutal—example of an ally acting against the hegemon's interests.

On the Left, critics argued that by framing the Lobby as a "normal" interest group, the authors sanitized a history of violence and intelligence overreach. Figures within the anti-Zionist movement suggested that the authors were engaging in a form of "gatekeeping," setting the boundaries of acceptable criticism to stay within the good graces of the Ivy League and mainstream media. For these observers, the silence on the Liberty was a sign that even the most daring mainstream academics were still operating under an implicit form of self-censorship. This created a perception that the book was a "half-measure," providing a robust analysis of campaign finance and think-tank influence while turning a blind eye to the literal blood spilled on the deck of an American ship. This perception of caution, whether intentional or not, diminished the book's status among those who believe the relationship requires a fundamental, ground-up moral and historical re-evaluation.

9.2. How Silence Empowers Critics of the Realist School

Ironically, the omission of the Liberty also provided an opening for the authors' most fervent opponents—the very pro-Israel advocates they were critiquing. Supporters of the status quo used the selective nature of the book's history to argue that Mearsheimer and Walt were "cherry-picking" data to suit a predetermined conclusion. By focusing only on the post-Cold War era and ignoring the complexities of 1967, the authors made it easier for their detractors to claim that their work lacked historical depth. Critics from the neoconservative right argued that the authors were ignoring the "tragic accidents" and the "fog of war" that characterize all long-term alliances, suggesting that a truly comprehensive history would show that the U.S. has also had friction with every other major ally, from the United Kingdom to France.

Furthermore, the silence on the Liberty allowed critics to frame the authors as being intellectually dishonest or, at the very least, afraid of their own thesis. If the Lobby was as powerful as they claimed, critics asked, why wouldn't they use the single most powerful example of that influence in action? By avoiding the "third rail" of the Liberty, Mearsheimer and Walt left a gap in their armor. Opponents seized on this, suggesting that if the authors weren't willing to discuss the most controversial aspects of the relationship, their entire "Realist" framework was perhaps more of a political tool than a scientific one. This silence empowered a narrative that the book was more of a polemic than a peer-reviewed history, allowing the pro-Israel establishment to dismiss the work as an incomplete and biased snapshot of a much more nuanced and mutually beneficial strategic partnership. This highlights the "Realist's Dilemma": by trying to be too respectable, they may have left themselves vulnerable to charges of being incomplete.

10. Reconciling Realism with the Historical Record

10.1. Can Interest Group Theory Explain Military Betrayal?

The central theoretical challenge posed by the USS Liberty is whether the tools of domestic political science—specifically interest group theory—are sufficient to explain a state's response to a lethal military provocation by an ally. Interest group theory, as utilized by Mearsheimer and Walt, operates on the logic of political exchange: groups provide campaign contributions, votes, and media support in exchange for favorable legislative and executive outcomes. This model is highly effective at explaining why the United States provides billions in military aid or why the Senate consistently passes lopsided pro-Israel resolutions. However, it struggles to account for the internal mechanics of a military cover-up. A kinetic attack on a sovereign naval vessel represents a breach of the most fundamental contract between a state and its service members. When a state chooses to suppress the details of such an attack to protect the reputation of the aggressor, it moves beyond the realm of "policy influence" and into the realm of "state captured by proxy."

Critics argue that by sticking to the interest group model, Mearsheimer and Walt essentially brought a knife to a gunfight. While their theory explains the "carrots" of the relationship, it remains silent on the "sticks"—or rather, the immunity from those sticks. If the Lobby's power is indeed restricted to "normal" political channels, it should theoretically stop at the water's edge where national security and the lives of sailors are concerned. The Liberty incident suggests that the influence is much more deeply integrated into the American command-and-control structure than a simple lobbying model suggests. To reconcile realism with this history, one must consider the possibility that the "special relationship" created a unique category of international actor: an ally that is functionally immune to the standard consequences of hostile action. This requires a more aggressive form of realism that accounts for "domestic capture" not just of the legislature, but of the very mechanisms of military justice and truth-telling.

10.2. The Necessity of Integrating Military History into Political Science

The exclusion of the Liberty from a seminal work on foreign policy highlights a persistent silo in American academia: the gap between political science and military history. Political scientists, particularly of the Realist school, tend to focus on "high politics"—treaties, balance of power, and systemic structures—often viewing individual military incidents as tactical noise rather than strategic data. Yet, as the Liberty demonstrates, a single tactical incident can reveal the hidden architecture of a strategic relationship. By ignoring the blood and steel of 1967, Mearsheimer and Walt produced a "clean" theory that lacks the "messy" validation of the historical record. Integrating military history into political science is not merely about adding "color" to a text; it is about stress-testing the theories against the harshest possible realities.

A more comprehensive Realism would argue that the way a state reacts to the killing of its own troops by an ally is the single most important data point for determining the true nature of that alliance. If the state reacts with transparency and demands for accountability, the alliance is a strategic partnership between equals. If the state reacts with secrecy, the suppression of survivors, and the recall of rescue flights, the alliance is a form of dependency or capture. For political science to remain relevant to the actual practice of foreign policy, it must be willing to engage with these uncomfortable military truths. The omission of the Liberty in 2007 may have been a tactical necessity for the authors to gain a hearing in the mainstream, but for the long-term integrity of the discipline, it represents a missed opportunity to build a theory that accounts for the full, unvarnished spectrum of how power and influence operate in the shadows of the special relationship.

11. Legacy and Criticism of The Israel Lobby Since 2007

11.1. Evolution of the Lobby in the 21st Century

The nearly two decades following the publication of The Israel Lobby have witnessed a dramatic transformation in the landscape of American political influence. When Mearsheimer and Walt first presented their thesis, the lobby was often perceived as a largely centrist, bipartisan force dominated by organizations like AIPAC. In the years since, the infrastructure of the lobby has expanded and diversified, reflecting broader shifts in American society. The rise of Christians United for Israel (CUFI) has arguably made the lobby more powerful and more resilient by tethering the pro-Israel cause to the massive electoral weight of the evangelical movement. Simultaneously, the emergence of groups like J Street has introduced a degree of pluralism into the discourse, providing a platform for those who support Israel but remain critical of specific occupation policies. This evolution underscores the authors' central claim that the lobby is a dynamic and multifaceted interest group, rather than a monolithic or stagnant force.

However, the most significant change has been the increasing partisan polarization of the U.S.-Israel relationship. What was once a rare point of consensus in Washington has increasingly become a wedge issue, with the Republican party positioning itself as the uncompromising defender of the Israeli right, while the Democratic party faces internal fractures between its traditional establishment and a rising progressive wing that is more critical of the alliance. This polarization has forced the lobby to adapt its strategies, moving away from broad bipartisan appeals and toward more targeted, ideologically driven mobilization. In this new environment, the power of the lobby is not diminishing, but it is becoming more visible and more contested, fulfilling Mearsheimer and Walt’s prediction that the special relationship would eventually face greater scrutiny as its strategic costs continued to mount in a post-Cold War world.

11.2. The Persistent Relevance of the USS Liberty in Modern Discourse

Despite the efforts of the political establishment to keep the USS Liberty confined to the archives of 1967, the incident has experienced a significant resurgence in modern political discourse. This revival is driven largely by the democratization of information facilitated by the digital age. In 2007, the authors could omit the Liberty without alienating the vast majority of their mainstream audience, but in the current era of social media and independent journalism, such omissions are more difficult to sustain. The surviving members of the USS Liberty Veterans Association have utilized online platforms to bypass traditional media gatekeepers, making declassified documents, oral histories, and technical diagrams of the attack accessible to a global audience. For a new generation of researchers and activists, the Liberty has become a symbol of the perceived lack of accountability and transparency that defines the U.S.-Israel bond.

Furthermore, the persistent relevance of the Liberty serves as a critique of the very normal interest group model that Mearsheimer and Walt promoted. For those who view the attack as a deliberate act of aggression, the incident remains the ultimate proof that the relationship operates on a level of immunity that no other interest group—from the NRA to the pharmaceutical lobby—could ever hope to achieve. The Liberty is frequently invoked in modern debates over military aid, intelligence sharing, and regional security as a cautionary tale about the dangers of unconditional support. As the American public becomes increasingly skeptical of long-term foreign entanglements, the memory of the Liberty provides a visceral historical anchor for arguments favoring a more restrained and self-interested foreign policy. By remaining an unresolved grievance, the Liberty continues to challenge the Realist narrative, serving as a reminder that some historical wounds are too deep to be healed by political maneuvering or strategic silence.

12. Conclusion: Expanding the Narrative of the Special Relationship

The omission of the USS Liberty from Mearsheimer and Walt's *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* stands as a definitive example of the tension between academic rigor and strategic messaging. By excluding the 1967 attack, the authors were able to present a thesis that adhered to the standards of mainstream political science, framing the "Lobby" as a conventional interest group operating within the legal and political norms of the American pluralist system. This tactical decision was undoubtedly successful in achieving its primary goal: the book became a global bestseller, sparked a necessary debate on the costs of the U.S.-Israel alliance, and survived a barrage of professional and personal attacks that would have buried a less cautiously framed work. For Mearsheimer and Walt, the Liberty was a casualty of analytical triage—a

"fringe" data point sacrificed to ensure the "mainstream" survival of their broader realist critique.

However, as the perspective of Ray McGovern and other intelligence veterans suggests, this omission came at a significant cost to the depth of the argument. By ignoring the Liberty, the authors failed to address the most profound manifestation of the Lobby's power: the ability to enforce institutional immunity even in the face of lethal force against American service members. In the political landscape of 2026, where the "taboos" surrounding U.S.-Israel relations are rapidly eroding and the democratization of information has brought once-classified histories to the forefront of public consciousness, the silence on the Liberty feels increasingly dated. The incident remains a foundational grievance that suggests the "special relationship" is not merely a product of campaign donations and lobbying, but a deeper, more systemic integration of interests that can override the basic sovereign functions of the American state. Ultimately, while Mearsheimer and Walt provided the definitive map of the Lobby's public influence, the ghost of the USS Liberty continues to signal the existence of a much darker and more complex terrain that political science has yet to fully map.

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